

FOR ANYONE ABOUT TO SIGN A CONTRACT WITH AN AI VENDOR

The AI Vendor Interrogation Kit

Eight questions to ask before signing anything. With a scoring card and an email you can copy.

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1 FIND THE ASSUMPTIONS

Why you need this kit.

Vendors sell certainty. Your job is to find the assumptions.

An AI vendor, like any other supplier, has an interest in making the deal feel low-risk. They will present numbers that look precise. They will talk about their "enterprise" tier and their "compliance" certifications. The marketing copy will have the answers. The contract will have the assumptions. Your job, before you sign, is to make those assumptions visible.

The kit on the following pages is eight questions. They cover return on investment, data, training, availability, exit, review controls, incident response and pilot scope. Each question has three parts: what a good answer looks like, what a red flag looks like, and what to do if they cannot answer.

The rule of the exercise

If a vendor cannot answer these questions in plain language, in writing, before you sign, they are not ready for your data. That is not a hostile position. It is the polite version of the same thought every procurement professional has when a salesperson says "trust us on this one".

What to ask for, in writing. The eight questions below, plus a draft contract. Send them by email. Ask for written responses. If the answers are vague, the answers are vague. That is the point of asking.

2 ROI, DATA, TRAINING, AVAILABILITY

Questions 1 to 4.

The return, the data, the training, the uptime.

1. Show me the arithmetic behind your return estimate.

Good answer. A named assumption per line. Time saved per item, items per week, loaded hourly cost, realisation rate. A range, not a single number.

Red flag. "Customers typically see 40% productivity gains" with no method, no time frame, no definition of productivity.

If they cannot answer. Ask for a reference customer with similar work who will share their actual numbers. If they will not, the headline figure is decoration.

2. What data enters your system and where is it processed?

Good answer. The exact data fields collected, the transport, the geographic location of processing and storage, and the retention period for each field.

Red flag. "Data is processed securely in the cloud" without a country, a retention period or a sub-processor list.

If they cannot answer. A vendor who does not know where your data goes cannot tell you what is happening to it. Find a vendor who can.

3. Is input used to train your models?

Good answer. Yes or no, with the contract clause that confirms it, and any opt-in or opt-out mechanism explained.

Red flag. "We don't train on customer data" with no contract clause, no SLA and no audit mechanism to verify.

If they cannot answer. Assume yes, and price the data risk accordingly.

4. What happens when your service is unavailable?

Good answer. A written SLA for uptime, a status page URL, an incident history, and a plan for graceful degradation.

Red flag. "Best efforts" or no SLA at all.

If they cannot answer. Ask how their last three incidents were communicated. Silence is a warning.

3 EXIT, CONTROLS, INCIDENTS, SCOPE

Questions 5 to 8.

How you leave, who is in charge, what goes wrong, and how big the first step is.

5. How do we extract our data if we leave?

Good answer. Export format documented (CSV, JSON, etc.), export latency committed in writing, deletion confirmed within a stated number of days after export.

Red flag. "We'll support you through the transition" with no format, no timeline, no commitment.

If they cannot answer. Treat the cost of switching as part of the contract value. If it is open-ended, the contract is open-ended.

6. What review and override controls does the human have?

Good answer. Per-output review queue, ability to stop the system mid-run, override authority in the console, audit log of every action.

Red flag. "The AI is highly accurate" instead of an answer about override.

If they cannot answer. An autonomous system you cannot stop is a vendor's product, not yours.

7. What is your incident response for harmful outputs?

Good answer. A named incident lead, an SLA for response, an SLA for customer notification, and a documented process for disclosure.

Red flag. "We have a trust and safety team" with no public process and no customer-facing commitment.

If they cannot answer. An incident you cannot escalate is an incident you cannot resolve.

8. Can we start with a bounded pilot?

Good answer. A short pilot at reduced cost, with a written exit on either side, and no auto-renewal into a full contract.

Red flag. "We only do annual contracts" or "the pilot is the same as production".

If they cannot answer. Any vendor who insists on a full deployment before evidence is collected has the deal structure wrong.

4 WORKSHEET

The scoring card.

Score the vendor. Be honest. The score is not the vendor's problem.

Score each of the eight questions 0, 1 or 2. Zero means they could not answer, or the answer was incoherent. One means the answer was vague, or arrived only after prompting. Two means a clear written answer that survives a sceptical reading. Total out of 16.

Q	QUESTION	NOTES	SCORE (0-2)
1	Arithmetic behind the return estimate		
2	What data enters and where is it processed		
3	Is input used to train your models		
4	What happens when the service is unavailable		
5	How do we extract our data if we leave		
6	What review and override controls the human has		
7	Incident response for harmful outputs		
8	Can we start with a bounded pilot		
Total			/ 16

What the score means

13-16 PROCEED WITH CAUTION A real conversation. Pilot, do not deploy. Use the conditions in the next page.	8-12 NEGOTIATE HARDER Get the vague answers in writing. Walk away if they cannot be sharpened.	0-7 WALK AWAY The vendor cannot answer basic questions. Find one that can.
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HONESTY A 2 requires a clear written answer. A confident salesperson on a call is not a 2. Reserve 2s for evidence.

5 AFTER THE SCORING

What to do with the answers.

If they pass: a bounded pilot. If they fail: an email.

The score is not the end of the conversation. It is the start. A high score means the vendor is worth a bounded pilot, not a full deployment. A low score means the vendor is not worth your time, and you need an email that closes the conversation politely but firmly.

If they passed: the pilot conditions

Five conditions, in writing, attached to any pilot agreement.

A defined scope. Inputs, outputs, user list, data tier. Nothing outside it.

A defined duration. Thirty to sixty days, with a written day-30 review.

A defined exit. You can leave at any point with your data, at no cost.

A defined success measure. What the pilot result must beat to continue.

A defined human. One named person on your side, one named person on theirs.

If they failed: the email

Short, polite, on the record. Send it even if you think the deal is already dead. Future-you will want the paper trail.

TEMPLATE***Email after a low score***

Thank you for the conversation on [date]. We appreciate the time.

Before we move forward, we need written answers to the eight questions we sent across. We have not received [enough detail / written confirmation] on [list of questions].

We are not in a position to proceed without these in writing. We are happy to revisit when they are. Thank you again for your time.

The discipline. Do not negotiate the score. Do not round up. A vendor who cannot answer a question today will not answer it better after the contract is signed.

6 BEFORE THE MEETING

The email to send first.

A short, useful email that surfaces 80% of the unknowns.

Send this before the first meeting. It saves everyone time. A vendor who can answer in writing is a vendor worth a meeting. A vendor who will not answer in writing is a vendor who has decided their sales process is more important than yours.

TEMPLATE

Pre-meeting email

Subject: Questions ahead of our meeting on [date]

Thank you for agreeing to meet on [date]. To make our time useful, please could you reply in writing to the questions below before the meeting.

1. The arithmetic behind your return estimate, including time saved per item, items per period, and the realisation rate.
2. What data fields your system collects, where it is processed, and the retention period for each field.
3. Whether input data is used to train your models, with the contract clause that confirms this.
4. Your published uptime SLA, with the URL of your status page.
5. The format and timeline for data export, and the deletion confirmation timeline.
6. The human review and override controls available to us, with a screenshot or short video if helpful.
7. Your incident response process for harmful outputs, including customer notification commitments.
8. Whether a bounded pilot of 30 to 60 days is available, separate from a full production contract.

We appreciate your time. Look forward to your reply.

[Your name]

What you learn from this email

Three things. Whether the vendor treats your questions as reasonable. Whether they can produce a written answer at all. Whether their answers are specific or marketing-shaped. The meeting itself becomes about the small remaining gaps, not about whether to take them seriously.

07 COLOPHON

The series and how to reach us.

Six field guides for UK SMEs. One Bristol-based company behind them.

The series

Six field guides for UK small and medium-sized businesses. Independent, plain-English, written by a practitioner.

01 · Where AI Actually Helps

Choose one worthwhile use case, scope a 30-day pilot and estimate the return before buying software.

02 · The 30-Day AI Pilot

A day-by-day guide to running the pilot you scoped in edition 01.

03 · Your Data, Your Rules

AI and privacy in plain English for UK businesses handling personal data.

04 · Writing AI Instructions That Actually Work

The six-part structure that turns vague prompts into reliable outputs.

05 · The AI Vendor Interrogation Kit

Eight questions to ask before signing a contract with any AI vendor.

06 · Your First AI Employee

A non-technical guide to autonomous AI agents for small businesses.

Colophon

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